



202-741-4692 (phone) • [student.advocate@dc.gov](mailto:student.advocate@dc.gov) (email) • <https://studentadvocate.dc.gov> (web)

**Written Testimony of Dan Davis, Chief Student Advocate  
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education  
FY 2019 Performance Oversight Hearing  
Committee of the Whole & Committee on Education  
Wednesday, January 29, 2020**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmember Grosso, committee members, and staff. My name is Dan Davis and I am honored to lead the work of Office of the Student Advocate as Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia now in its fifth year of operation. Our office supports and guides families in navigating our complex system of public education in the District. Every day our office works to ensure that family and student voice, stay at the center of our system of public education. I am excited to share with you today our work and I thank you for this opportunity to testify.

In school year (SY) 2018-19, our office immersed itself with connecting our services and supports to students and families at both traditional and charter campus throughout the District. We continued to build partnerships with government agencies, schools/local education agencies (LEAs), and community-based organizations. The core of our work focuses on amplifying and supporting student and parent voice in the decision-making process. It is essential that the work to correct the systemic issues of public education in the District, rest upon the input and lived experiences of students and families. Our work focuses on clarifying systems, reducing barriers, and providing resources and avenues of access for families. Our office supports the needs and advocacy of students, families, and educators in three distinct ways:

**First, our Requests for Assistance line, which serves as a 311 for all things related to public education in the District of Columbia.**

Per statutory mandate, our office operates a public education hotline to answer questions, provide information and coach as need on how to use public education resources and agency/organizational referrals. Calls to the hotline are answered live Monday through Friday, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm; in SY 2018-19, we were able to serve 507 callers directly through this RFA process. We served nearly 20% more families from SY 2017-18. In addition to those 507 calls during our operating hours, we received an additional 251 calls outside of our operating hours. When callers reach our voicemail during non-operating hours, the bilingual voicemail message shares our website resources, accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The high volume of calls made to our RFA line outside of our operating hours highlights the persistent needs families have regarding public education. To date, for Quarters 1 and 2 of SY 2019-20, we have supported 245 individuals through our Request for Assistance process.

More than 50% of the RFAs to our office come from the wards with the largest number of school-aged children in the city, Wards 7 and 8. More than 65% of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS at one of its 116 school buildings. Less than 30% of our calls came from families that attend a public charter school, which illustrates a need to connect with more charter school leaders in addition to our continued partnership with the Public Charter School Board. Most of our calls came from families with students enrolled in grades 1 through 5, which is proportionate of enrollment share for those grade-bands in both traditional and charter public schools.

Families and stakeholders sought support in SY 2018-19 around issues of enrollment/access, special education and student safety. Enrollment/access concerns by parents ranging from school choice and the lottery process to untimely uninvite notifications from schools. Families with special education related questions and concerns ranged from requesting 504 plans and individual education plans (IEP), to school placement. Student safety concerns centered around safe passage and assault; often parents sought guidance on student discipline related to exclusionary discipline practices.

**Secondly, we support the needs of families and educators through the Informational Resources Tools developed by our office.**

As we review questions and concerns that come to our RFA line and collect feedback from our stakeholders, we create resources that can best address information and resource needs that can create barriers to access. Our online Education and Community Resource Guide, Information and Advocacy Resources and Tools, and Parent & Family Go-To Guide, all housed on our website, are evidence of our effort to streamline information that helps families better understand the public education system and its policies and procedures. Our online resources include:

- Advocacy & Lobbying Toolkit
- Attendance and Truancy Resources
- Behavioral & Mental Health Resources
- Bullying Resources
- Dyslexia
- Effective Communication
- Enrollment
- Graduation Requirement
- Homeless Children & Youth Resources
- Parent Leadership Toolkit
- Race, Equity, and Inclusion
- Resources for Military/Services Families
- Right to Know Ask Sheets
- Safe Passage
- Special Education & School Supports
- Student Discipline
- Student Leadership
- Teacher Representation
- Testing & Assessments
- DC Public Education Governance

(<https://sboe.dc.gov/page/advocacy>)

I will highlight a few specific examples that were created or updated in FY19

**Go-To Guide:** In SY 2017-18, we released our “Right to Know” ask sheets, which provide helpful information and conversation starters, so parents and families are more informed on processes within DC public education. In SY 2018-19, we compiled those resources into one guide for families. In SY 2019-20, we added and updated pages regarding school discipline, attendance, bullying, mental health, homelessness, and for military families. The guide – which has been translated in Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Amharic, and French – is available both online and Spanish, Amharic, and English version are available in print. In SY 2018-19, over 5000 printed copies were distributed to parents, schools, libraries, and other resource centers. Additionally, so far in FY20, we distributed more than 1000 Go-To Guides to public libraries and every EdFest attendee (2500) received a copy.

**Student Discipline:** In SY 2018-19 we released the District of Columbia Student Discipline Guide, in collaboration with the Every Student Every Day Coalition and the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, has been a valuable tool used to educate students, families, and school staffs on how to navigate the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act of 2018. This comprehensive guide not only explains the new rules for student/school discipline in both DCPS and public charter schools, but it also highlights terms to know and breaks down organizational structures families and educators need to understand. Furthermore, the guide connects families and educators to resources, both governmental and non-governmental, that can offer additional support as needed. The guide – which has been translated in Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Amharic, and French – is available both online and Spanish, Amharic, and English version are available in print. In SY2018-19, more than 1300 Discipline Guides have been distributed across the district. So far in SY 19-20, we distributed more than 900 copies to public libraries and service providers. (<https://sboe.dc.gov/page/discipline>)

Our office continues to partner with Howard University School of Law in SY 2018-19 that partnership worked to collect and conduct a comparative analysis for all of the LEA student discipline policies in the city in order to have a better understanding of the policies and to offer policy recommendations toward the streamlining of these policies in order to better serve the

needs of students and their families. In SY 2019-20 we expanded this partnership to include Advocates for Justice in Education, we again collected and conduct a comparative analysis of LEA handbooks, but we focused this year on compliance with the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act of 2018.

**Race, Equity, and Inclusion Toolkit:** Race and class often serve as barriers to engagement, leaving a void between students, families, communities, and schools. We created our Race, Equity, and Inclusion toolkit as a resource for families, schools, and community organizations looking to begin their work towards creating and maintaining equitable and inclusive spaces in education. The information and resources included in the toolkit have been pulled from organizations, educators, and scholars who have been instrumental in moving the conversation on race, equity, and inclusion forward both nationally and locally. In the toolkit, families, schools, and community organizations can access standardized definitions, articles, books, videos, and other informational materials addressing issues surrounding race, equity, and inclusion. This resource is live now and can be found at: <https://reitoolkit.dc.gov>

**My Teacher DC Parent Resource:** With DC's confusing education landscape, countless resources have been created to help families choose which schools are the best fit for their students, with the most recent being the DC School Report Card. Information regarding the students attending public and public charter schools is plentiful, but there is limited information regarding the teachers working within these school buildings. Teachers play a vital role in establishing the culture of any school and directly influence student achievement. Unfortunately, families do not have access to information about a school's teaching staff. The My Teacher DC resource is an informative tool that pairs information locally about DC public and charter schoolteachers with national research on the importance of having a representative teacher workforce. This resource provides a list of detailed questions families can ask school leadership when choosing a school for their children. This resource will be live in February 2020, and will be found at: <https://myteacher.dc.gov>

**Third, our office supports the needs of families, educators, and the community through our workshops, trainings, and strategic outreach efforts.**

Students, Families and Community members are at the heart of our work. We continue to foster those relationships through our outreach efforts and strive to enhance their capacity by making additional support available through workshops and trainings.

In addition to increased volume of calls through our RFA line, we connected face to face with over 3000 District families in the community in SY 2018-19. About 40% of our outreach efforts involved engaging families, communities, and individual schools. We focused on connecting with populations and communities deemed hard to serve, in SY 2018-19 we connected with homeless students and families, spoke with justice involved parents and followed through with commitments to English Language Learning families to make more resources accessible. We strive to create and sustain partnership with agencies and organizations that allow us to work collaboratively and more effectively as we meet the needs of our families. To date, in Quarters 1 and 2 of SY19-20, we have engaged with over 1,123 education stakeholders through our engagement and outreach meetings and events, which includes the workshops and trainings hosted by our office.

**Justice Involved Families:** In SY 18-19, our office began discussions with the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizen Affairs, the DC Department of Corrections, National Re-Entry Network for Returning Citizens and residents currently housed at DC Jail about barriers to be an active and informed parent while justice-involved and as a returning citizen. We engaged small group conversations with several residents at DC Jail. Leadership from DC Department of Corrections and the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizen Affairs see a protective benefit for both child and justice-involved parent.

In Spring of SY 19-20, our office will release a Returning Citizen Parent and Family Go-To Guide with information for parents that are justice-involved or returning citizens that will lay out ways to be an active educational partner while away. The guide will also contain information on how to engage students with grade and age appropriate conversation starters.

**Special Education:** Our office continues to be committed to supporting parents and students who need specialized instruction. In SY 2018-19 we hosted our informational sessions on special education across the District in partnership with DC State Board of Education

Representatives, Councilmembers, and ward-based education organizations. This series is focused on providing information to families about provisions of federal and local special education law, the difference between 504 plans and IEPs, prompting evaluation, determining eligibility for services, and understanding procedural safeguards. This forum also gives families the opportunity to interact with local level special education experts to workshop their specific concerns. Sessions in Ward 1 were conducted in Spanish and English with live interpretation available for Amharic speakers.

In addition to our workshop series, we have expanded the resources and tools related to special education on our website, including our workshop presentation, as both a printable handout and a webinar; a list of special education acronyms, abbreviations, and definitions; a list of resources and organizational supports; SPED ask sheets for School Choice ; and our Parent & Family Go-To Guide. (<https://sboe.dc.gov/node/1153932>)

This school year our office is creating a Dyslexia handbook with Decoding Dyslexia to help inform families and educational stakeholders about Dyslexia. The toolkit is 11 pages and includes Need to Know, Common Myths, Signs and Symptoms, and Terms to Know as well as a guide of questions to ask your student's school, and a page that includes both local and national resources that can provide more information and support for students with dyslexia.

**Bullying:** In SY 2018-19, our office launched our first bullying prevention podcast, in partnership with DC Office of Human Rights Citywide Bullying Prevention Program (OHR Bullying). This podcast was developed to provide clarity regarding local laws and definitions of bullying, to discuss bullying prevention practices, and to share accessible resources and supports for students and families. A podcast forum facilitates more open conversations about bullying, including what bullying is and what the school's role is in ensuring student safety and how parents can be partners. We were intentional about discussing practical tools and techniques that parents, school staff and other caring adults can employ to reduce incidents of victimization and aggressive behavior. In SY 19-20 we are planning to host podcast sessions with students, school staff, and stakeholders to share experiences and strategies that work.

(<https://sboe.dc.gov/node/1334956>)

**Safe Passage:** In SY 2018-19, we worked to engage the community on student safety and safe passage. In Ward 8, we established a Ward 8 Student Safety and Safe Passage Working Group, which includes students, parents, Ward 8 non-profit and community-based organizations, government offices and agencies, and schools/ LEAs. These conversations aim to bring education, health and safety, and community leaders together to discuss how to address the community violence impacting students, schools, and communities.

The ward 8 group led to cohesive strategies and communication across Sectors and LEAs to serve families and increase safety as students' cross neighborhoods throughout the ward to and from school. OSA was able to launch Safe Spots a pilot Safe Passage initiative in partnership with the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education. Safe Spots are businesses, community organizations, and District government locations along corridors in the city heavily trafficked by students during arrival and dismissal. These locations have agreed to offer respite to students when student feel unsafe or need refuge from an ongoing ruckus.

In SY 19-20 OSA connected with school leaders, parents and public safety officials in Ward 4 as well as Ward 7 to discuss their communities respective concerns and develop solutions for student safety during arrival and dismissal. OSA continues to partner with the DME for an expansion of Safe Spots in several other wards.

**Homeless Families:** In SY 18-19 our office joined DC Prep, Children's Playtime Project, Sasha Bruce Youthwork and several community leaders in conversations about ways to decrease barriers to success for students and families experiencing housing instability. We hosted focus groups with parents at several of the temporary shelter sites at the hotels along New York Avenue. We conducted brief interview surveys with parents and frontline staff assigned to facilities for young adult-headed households.

In SY 2019-20 our office plans to continue to meet families where they are and host workshops and sessions for residents at temporary hotel-based shelter sites, but also expanded to the short-term family housing facilities. Moreover, we are revamping our current homeless student and family toolkit to be an online and in hand pocket guide. Our Office has distributed Family



Go-to Guides and Discipline Guides at both the temporary hotel shelter sites and the short-term family housing locations.

**Language Access:** We are committed to developing deeper relationships within our non-English or limited English-speaking communities. We utilize Language Line services in order to communicate with callers to our RFA line who do not speak English. While access to the Language Line has been valuable to our office, we know that in order to serve all communities well we need to be present within those communities through other trusted persons and entities. To that end, our outreach to non-English speaking or limited English-speaking communities has been possible through collaborative efforts with the Mayor's offices on various affairs (i.e. African Affairs, etc.) and community-based or religious organizations that are trusted within those communities. In SY 2018-19, we were more intentional with our outreach strategy by releasing advertisements for our office, resources, and upcoming events in multiple languages. We also offered live interpretive services for Spanish and Amharic-speaking families during our bullying and special education workshops to eliminate English mastery as a barrier for access.

Our office finished the translation of all our materials into all six languages. Each of the resource materials are in various stages of production but some of have been posted to our website, some will be printed in the coming months, and others have already been printed and distributed. It is our hope to have this completed by April.

**LEA Technical Support:** In SY 2018-19, our office offered additional support to individual schools and LEAs on various topics ranging from family engagement practice to school discipline to special education and everything else in between. Each school year we do extensive outreach to schools to offer resources and supports. This school year we have gone one step further in offering technical support to help schools be proactive in their approach to engaging with students and families in meaningful ways and mitigating issues as they arise.

## **Conclusion**

The work that I have highlighted here today speaks to the office's commitment to interjecting the voice of students, families, and communities into decision-making. The choices that

individual families make regarding their students' education is impacted by how accessible the structure of public schools in DC. Currently in school year 2019-20 we are continuing to build upon all of the aforementioned work and are scaling to meet the demand as much as possible within the current capacity of the office.

Even though we have been able to utilize these resources District wide, current constraints within our office limits the larger impact we could have considering that there are over 90,000 students attending public and charter schools. We look forward to serving families and students in more direct, comprehensive, and collaborative ways.

Finally, if there is any person interested in contacting our office, they can do so by calling us at 202-741-4692 or emailing us at [student.advocate@dc.gov](mailto:student.advocate@dc.gov). Again, thank you all for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions that you might have.